DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 322 531 CS 212 481

AUTHOR Dodson, Charles Brooks
TITLE "The Word Is Not The Thing": Teaching General Semantics to Undergraduates.
PUB DATE Apr 88
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College English Association (New Orleans, LA, April 14-16, 1988).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Course Content; *Course Descriptions; Course Objectives; Discourse Analysis; Higher Education; *Language Role; *Semantics; Student Journals; Teaching Guides; *Undergraduate Students
IDENTIFIERS *General Semantics Paradigm (Korzybski)

ABSTRACT

A course in general semantics has as its primary aim to help students become aware of the interactions between words, perceptions, and behavior, and particularly how language both affects and effects belief and even action. Students are encouraged not only to be more responsive to language, but also to become more skillful users of language themselves, through class discussion (lectures are seldom used in the course), small group discussion, and the writing of papers and journal entries that measure textbook concepts against their own observation and extensional experience. The primary text used in the course is S. I. Hayakawa's "Language in Thought and Action," chosen for its myriad of down-to-earth examples of principles and concepts, and for the many useful "Applications" which end each chapter. It is supplemented by a book of readings about language--MacKillop and Cross's "Speaking of Words." This book is particularly useful in providing essays for three topics which are major units in the course: slanting; racist and sexist language; and the language of advertising. Formal requirements in the course include two papers and two exams, as well as the journal writing previously mentioned, which includes freewriting to specific assigned topics and "paste-ins" (items gathered by the students and pasted into their journals which represent "real world" examples of the concepts, principles, and topics covered in the course). Judging by positive formal course evaluations and by solid enrollments, the course is very successful. (SR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED322531

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Charles B Dodson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

"The Word Is Not the Thing:"

Teaching General Semantics to Undergraduates

by
Charles Brooks Dodson
University of North Carolina at Wilmington

presented to
The College English Association
April 1988

My purpose today is to tell you about a course in General Semantics that I have been teaching for several years. If any of you teach a similar course yourselves, perhaps I can give you some ideas that you can use, and I hope to find out from you, in turn, ways that I can improve mine. Or perhaps the description of the course I teach will lead some of you to develop such a course yourselves. In any event, I will be glad to share with anyone who is interested, course ideas and materials that I have developed. I would like to sketch now for you the aims and content of the course, and describe some typical assignments.

The course is in General Semantics, the field of inquiry initiated by Alfred Korzybski in such works as Science and Sanity and elaborated on in the writings of S. I. Hayakawa and others. Though General Semantics has its theoretical side, it is its pragmatic approach to the language of everyday life that has always interested me and which I stress in the course. Thus the primary aim of the course is to help students become aware of the interactions between words, perceptions, and behavior, particularly how language both affects and effects belief and even action. Students are encouraged

CS212481

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

not only to be more responsive to language than they had been before they took the course, but also to become more skillful users of language themselves, through class discussion (I seldom lecture in the course), small group discussion, and the writing of papers and journal entries that measure textbook concepts against their own observation and extensional experiences. As I tell the students in the course syllabus,

> We are so accustomed to language that we take it for granted, often unaware of how much we are manipulated by words. By the end of the course we should all be more responsive to language--less naive, more critically observant, and even (I hope) better thinkers.

To help achieve these perhaps overly optimistic goals, I have been using Hayakawa's Language in Thought and Action (1) as my primary text, supplementing it with a book of readings about language. The Hayakawa text is somewhat dated, I think, but it has two great advantages for my purposes in the course: First, it illustrates principles and concepts with a myriad of down-to-earth examples drawn from Hayakawa's own experiences, popular culture, politics, the media, and commonplace situations--examples that are easily recognizable by students and that have counterparts in their own observation and experience. Second, each chapter ends with many useful "Applications" of the chapter's theoretical contents; these applications serve to stimulate class discussion and also provide good topics for journal writing. The book itself introduces such basic concepts as the symbolic nature of words; the difference between the extensional world (what is "out there") and the intensional world of our perceptions and

of the words we use to label these perceptions, that is, the distinction between territories and the mental maps we make of them; abstraction, the process by which we notice only what things have in common and omit their differences, a mental process that both defines our humanness and leads to inhumanity; the influence that affective responses to words have on our beliefs and behavior; presymbolic language, the language we use when we want to communicate something besides information; directive language, the language we use when we want someone to do something, be it open a door, buy a certain brand of toothpaste, or remain faithful to our spouse; the surprisingly close relationship between poetry and advertising; and much more.

I use the language reader to augment Hayakawa's discussions and to keep the Hayakawa text contemporary. I have used Goshgarian's Exploring Language (2) several times, though right now I am using MacKillop and Cross's Speaking of Words (3). I have found in these collections material ranging from the Whorfian hypothesis to Mark Twain's sardonic parable "The War Prayer," about the danger of high-level abstractions, to why Leonard Slye changed his name to Roy Rogers. The supplementary text is especially useful in providing essays for three topics about which Hayakawa says relatively little but which I have made into major units in the course: slanting, racist and sexist language, and the language of advertising.

I use two pieces from the reader to prepare students for a paper in which they examine a short news article from a magazine or newspaper for its use of slanting and propaganda devices. (Prewriting activities for this project include a collaborative analysis of an article on Idi Amin from Newsweek, several classroom exercises

applying the principles explained in the assigned readings, and analysis of one or two sample papers written in previous semesters.)

Though I make no major writing assignments in the unit on racist and sexist language, we read and discuss several classic essays on these topics, starting with Ossie Davis's "The English Language Is My Enemy," and including Bosmajian's "The Language of White Racism," Casey Miller and Kate Swift's "One Small Step for Genkind," Cyra McFadden's "In Defense of Gender," and several others, ending with Muriel Schulz's "Is the English Language Anybody's Enemy?" which makes the often-overlooked point that English is as rich in denigrating words for describing men as for describing women and minority groups. I also supplement readings with abundant materials that I have gleaned from comic strips, newspapers, and the Quarterly Review of Doublespeak, a valuable source of illustrations for many parts of the course.

In a third major unit, on advertising language, the readings include self-confessions by two successful advertising writers, David Ogilvy and "Carl Wrighter," who reveal somewhat cynically the ploys and psychology they use to trap the unwary consumer; I also have students try their hand at writing various kinds of copy themselves. In one journal assignment, whose results I run off and share with the class, they create an ad headline for a far-fetched product. (Last semester it was eye makeup for men; it used to be colored contact lenses--so you could change your eye color to match your shirt--but then such a product actually appeared on the market.) They are also to append, for their putative boss in the advertising agency, an explanation of their intent in the ad. In another journal assignment,

they must compose a series of slogans or headlines for Wartsoff, a fictitious wart remover, using various ploys about which they have previously read ("weasel words," "water is wet," "we're unique," stroking, uncompleted comparison, endorsement, etc.). As a climax to the unit, I ask them to create dishonest language by drawing upon their knowledge of various semantic principles and advertising ploys to write an ad for the local newspaper, justifying the rezoning of a residential neighborhood near the campus for development into an industrial park, complete with a smelting plant that will emit a pungent, purplish smoke (4). They are to supplement the ad with a letter to a fictitious developer/client, explaining in nontechnical terms what they are trying to accomplish in the ad and the nature of the appeals and techniques that the ad uses. The ad that typically results is a synthesis of the hard sell of consumer-product advertising and the soft sell of the institutional ad (several of which I cull from magazines and newspapers and bring to class for illustration). And I point out to the students, too, that even the letter of explanation is a kind of soft sell ad as well, in which the audience (a potential client) is very different from the audience that will read the newspaper ad. This assignment, and especially the ads themselves, is always a delight to read, by the way, for the students seem to enjoy the chance to use their imaginations in what they see as an unusually "unacademic" paper.

There remains to describe briefly the formal requirements in the course and a few general teaching strategies I use. In addition to the two papers I have mentioned, I give two exams, a midterm and a second one during the final exam period. The latter is specifically

on the material covered since the first exam, but, as I tell the class in the syllabus, the course material is cumulative, and concepts introduced in the first few chapters of the textbook reappear again and again, in one variation or another, throughout the course. I also give frequent pop quizzes on reading assignments; these cover the facts and terminology encountered in the reading, enabling me to emphasize application, recognition, and manipulation (rather than recitation) of course concepts in the major exams.

I have already mentioned the journal writing I ask the students to do. Journal entries are of two general kinds: one is free-write responses to specific topics that I assign for each class. These are sometimes study questions or other topics from the end of a chapter in Hayakawa or an essay in the reader; or sometimes they are responses to topics I have thought up or to materials I have brought into class; occasionally they are unfocused free-writes, but not often, because I try to keep the journal writing, like everything else in the course, very pragmatically oriented. These journal entries are often used in the next day's class discussion.

I call the other kind of journal entry "paste-ins," which the students are supposed to gather on their own initiative and literally paste or tape onto pages in their journals. These are articles, news stories, cartoons and comic strips, ads, headlines, even snippets of overheard or remembered conversations--that is, "real world" examples of the concepts, principles, and topics covered in the readings and discussions, annotated briefly if their relation to the course material is not self-evident. I expect a certain number of them--forty, for example, and in some variety, if the journal is to

receive an A. I stress to students that the journal writings are not graded individually and that their journal grade will depend on how many of the assigned free-writes and how many paste-ins a journal contains; thus the journal is the one place in the course where quantity counts.

As I said earlier, I do very little lecturing from day to day, preferring instead to accomplish the course goals by discussion and exemplification. When a quiz is given, we discuss it right away, and I use the quiz questions as a point of departure as we talk about the content of the reading assignment for that day. We do group work occasionally, and I bring a lot of material to class that I have found in newspapers, magazines, and the daily deluge of junk mail that clutters my mailboxes at home and at the office.

The course seems to be very successful, if I am to judge by the formal evaluations it has received and by the solid enrollments it has produced. And every once in a while I get one of those serendipitous, informal endorsements that mean so much to a teacher. Last fall, for example, I received a letter from a former class member and recent graduate who was in the class about two years ago, containing a newspaper article that she thought would make a great paste-in.

At a July 1987 conference attended by representatives of the CEA, MLA, NCTE, Four C's, and other professional organizations all concerned with teaching and learning English, the participants concluded that

> [i]n a complex, media-saturated society where information (often disjointed or linked only by shallow and even misleading connections) keeps increasing, citizens must be able to interpret

print and nonprint sources in sophisticated ways....(5)

If a course such as the one I have briefly described for you today gives its students a bit more of that sophistication, makes them better able to separate the wheat from the voluminous semantic chaff, and, as Hayakawa would have it, makes them more aware of their unconscious assumptions about language, and therefore about their fellow human beings and human affairs, then both my students' and my own time has been not only enjoyably, but well, spent.

Notes

(1) Fourth Ed., New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978.

(2) Fourth Ed., Boston: Little, Brown, 1986.

(3) Third Ed., New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1986.

(4) This assignment was devised by my colleague Richard Veit and appears in his The Little Writing Book (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1982).

(5) Phyllis Franklin, "From the Editor," MLA Newsletter, Fall, 1987, p. 5.